

**The Commission for Historical and
Architectural Preservation**

Landmark Designation Staff Report
June 12, 2012



The Equitable Building

10-12 N. Calvert Street
Baltimore, Maryland

Summary

The Equitable Building is significant as the first skyscraper in Baltimore. It was the largest and most highly decorated office building in Baltimore when it was constructed in 1891-1893, and is the oldest existing building on Courthouse Square. This commercial building was designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style by prominent Baltimore architects Charles L. Carson and Joseph Evans Sperry, and features elements of Sullivanesque architecture. The Equitable Building was the first building in Baltimore to be constructed with a “cage” of cast-iron girders and columns supporting the steel floor beams independent from the exterior framing of the building. The building was fireproof, and survived the Baltimore Fire of 1904, though the interior was destroyed. It was one of several fireproof office buildings that helped stop the fire from spreading further north. Throughout its existence, the Equitable Building has housed offices of businesses, banks, insurance, and law.

Property History

The Equitable Building was the first skyscraper in Baltimore when it was constructed in 1891-1893 at the southwest corner of North Calvert and East Fayette Streets in downtown Baltimore. The fireproof Equitable Building was the largest and “most superbly appointed” office building south of New York City.¹ Towering over the other buildings in downtown Baltimore at ten stories tall, it was a novelty when it was constructed, both for its height and the almost exclusive use of the building for offices.² It is the oldest existing building on Courthouse Square.³ The building was designed primarily by Charles L. Carson before his death in 1891, and was completed by Joseph Evans Sperry. The firm Norcross Bros., of Worcester, MA, was the builder.⁴ Described as Italian Renaissance in style when it was constructed, this ten-story commercial building features Sullivanesque architectural details. Throughout its existence, the Equitable Building has housed offices of businesses, law, government, insurance, and banking.⁵

The building sits on the former site of Barnum’s City Hotel, internationally known for its luxury accommodations and excellent cuisine. For over sixty years, it hosted many important visitors, including John Quincy Adams, Charles Dickens, Washington Irving, Edward, Prince of Wales (later becoming Edward VII), Edwin Booth, and Sarah Bernhardt.⁶ The hotel was closed and sold in 1889 to the National Trust and Guarantee Company.⁷ In 1890, the Calvert Building and Construction Company purchased the property and demolished the building in order to construct the Equitable Building.⁸

The great height of the Equitable Building and other skyscrapers was possible because of a method of construction developed at the end of the 19th century. The Equitable Building was the first building in Baltimore constructed with a “cage” of cast-iron girders and columns supporting the steel floor beams independent from the exterior framing of the building.⁹ H.L. Mencken remembered that the Equitable Building drew “as much attention as a two-headed boy” with crowds gathering to watch the construction of the

steel-beamed office building, discussing the danger of the elevators and the fire risk to those with offices at the top of the building.¹⁰ The Equitable Building was soon surpassed in height by other buildings, including its neighboring building to the west, the Calvert Building, which was also owned by the Calvert Building and Construction Company.¹¹

The use of the Equitable Building exclusively as an office building was a novel idea and not well-received at first. The *Sun* noted that some people thought that “it would be useless to build a rookery when so many offices were to be had in the city on the first and second floors.” Mencken iterated the lukewarm response that the building first received, stating that the “old-time lawyers moved into it slowly, and, I believe, reluctantly. Many of them, indeed, held out against office buildings to the end...”¹² Proponents for the building argued that model office buildings already existed in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, and that the upper floors were most desirable because of the great amount of light and air.¹³

The building has a highly ornate exterior, which was originally matched with an opulent interior that was destroyed in the Baltimore Fire. The entrances, vestibules, and hallways on the first floor were the most lavish, decorated with seventy-three colorful marble mosaics. Other public spaces, such as the banking rooms and restaurant, were also richly ornamented. The building housed 328 offices on the upper floors, and five large offices on the first floor. There were also four banking rooms, with two on the first floor, and two more in the basement. The top floor housed a large restaurant and café, the Café Calvert, as well as the law library while the new courthouse was built.¹⁴ There was a roof garden which provided a magnificent view of the city and surrounding country. The building featured a café, billiards room, and a barber shop on the first floor, and the Turkish baths in the basement were used into the 1950s.¹⁵ The lighting in the building was electric and gas. The building also had nineteen bathrooms, six passenger elevators, and one freight elevator, all of which were new amenities when it was constructed.¹⁶

The building materials were provided by many prominent Baltimore firms and national firms. The Baltimore firms included the nationally-renowned firm Bartlett, Hayward & Co., who provided the structural iron and elevators, High Sisson & Sons provided the marble, John Evans & Co. provided the stone and plaster carving, the Maryland Brick Co. provided the bricks. Notable national firms that contributed to the building include Sharpless & Watts of Philadelphia, who provided the mosaics and tile, and Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Co. of New York who provided the terra cotta.¹⁷

In 1899, the Calvert Building and Construction Company began construction on the twelve-story Calvert Building, located immediately west of the Equitable Building. The two buildings were connected so that they could be used as one building. The Calvert Building shared the same architect and a similar architectural aesthetic as the Equitable Building.¹⁸ It was demolished in 1971.¹⁹

Although it was constructed to be fireproof, the Equitable Building was significantly damaged in the Baltimore Fire of 1904 along with twelve other fireproof buildings.²⁰ The Equitable and the adjacent Calvert Building caught fire and “gave forth a glare that

lighted the city for miles around,” according to the *Sun*. They were two of the six fireproof office buildings that helped stop the fire from spreading further north.²¹ The fireproof exterior framing of the Equitable Building survived the fire, but the interior framing and opulent interior were destroyed. The Equitable Building sustained losses worth 74% of its value.²² The interior was completely rebuilt by the Norcross Bros. Co. at a cost of \$570,000 soon after. J. Evans Sperry was the architect of the reconstruction.²³

In 1952, the building was sold by the Calvert Building and Construction Company to the Equitable Building Corporation. In 1964, this company changed its name to Ten Calvert Corporation. Three years later, the company proposed to cover the entire exterior of the building with colored metal paneling, which was intended to modernize the structure. This plan was rejected by the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) as well as the Planning Commission, because doing so would “uglify” a building important both for its architecture and for prime office space downtown. Instead, it was recommended that the owner clean and restore the bird-stained façade to its original beauty, which had been requested five years earlier as part of the city’s downtown beautification plan.²⁴

The property was sold to the Baltimore Investment Associates in 1979, and underwent extensive interior renovations and utility upgrades.²⁵ The Aid Association for Lutherans purchased the building at auction in 1993, and sold it seven years later to 10 Calvert Street, LP, owned by Houston-based real estate firm Boxer Properties.²⁶ In 2004, the property was sold to the current owner, RWN 10 Calvert Street Owner, LLC, owned by Richard Naing.²⁷

Architectural and Historical Context

At the end of the 19th century, Baltimore’s first skyscrapers, or high-rise office buildings, were constructed. These buildings were framed with cast-iron and steel, which allowed for heights of up to fifteen stories. They radically changed the scale of the city, transformed the skyline, and ushered in a new era of architecture. The high rise buildings constructed in the last decade of the 19th century were located along Calvert Street. The Equitable Building was the first of these skyscrapers, and it set the standards for those that followed it.

The architects of the Equitable Building, Charles L. Carson and Joseph Evans Sperry, were members of the American Institute of Architects. Charles Carson was one of the founding members of the Baltimore chapter of the AIA, and he designed many significant buildings in Baltimore, including the Mount Vernon Place Methodist Church (with Thomas Dixon), the first seven branches of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, academic buildings, religious buildings, and private homes across the city.²⁸ Joseph Evans Sperry was also a prominent and prolific architect, and was recognized as a Fellow of the AIA in 1923.²⁹ His works include St. Mark’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Bromo-Seltzer Tower, the Mercantile Safe Deposit and Trust Company (with J.B. Noel Wyatt), and the Provident Bank Building (with York & Sawyer), all of which are Baltimore City

Landmarks. The Equitable Building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing building to the Business and Government Historic District.

Architectural Description

The Equitable Building is one of the first Commercial style buildings in Baltimore, built in the Italian Renaissance Revival style, with some Sullivanesque-style details. The ten-story building is constructed with Worchester mottled granite, buff brick, and white terra cotta.³⁰ The free-standing rectangular building sits on the southwest corner of N. Calvert and E. Fayette Streets and has two alleys located to the south and west of the building. There are entrances on three sides of the building, windows on all elevations, and an interior courtyard to provide natural light to the entire building. The primary entrance of the building is located on N. Calvert Street. The Calvert Street façade is 117 feet wide and has five bays with a central entrance. The Calvert Street façade also has businesses in its basement that are accessible from the street, taking advantage of the topography that slopes down from west to east. The Fayette Street façade is 206 feet long and has thirteen bays, with another central entrance.

The Italian Renaissance Revival style is evident in the Equitable Building in its arcaded openings in the rusticated first floor, belt courses, and quoins on the upper stories. The Sullivanesque style features found in the building include the vertical bands of windows, terra cotta bas-relief panels, deep projecting eaves, and tripartite design – possessing a visually distinctive base, middle, and top of the building. The Sullivanesque style is named for Louis Sullivan, the late 19th-early 20th century Chicago architect recognized as the father of skyscrapers and modernism.

According to the commercial architecture typology developed by architectural historian Richard Longstreth, this building is classified as a three-part vertical block (also referred to as a tripartite design). This building imitates the three parts of a classical column in its composition, with the building divided up into base, shaft, and capital.³¹ In the Equitable Building, the tripartite design is emphasized with each part comprised of a different material or finish. On the primary Calvert Street façade, the lower three stories of the building are faced with rusticated granite and serve as the base. Two-story high arcaded openings are located in each bay. The central bay serves as the entrance to the building, and is highly decorated with a variety of ornate molding and terra cotta bas-relief. The arch of the entranceway is filled with semi-circular iron scrollwork above a bronze sign that gives the name of the building. The entrance to the building was originally open, but has been filled in with revolving doors. A belt course decorated with a wave scroll pattern separates the first and second floors from the third floor, which has paired windows in each bay, with the three central pairs of windows flanked by polished Doric columns. Carved above the center bay of windows are the words “ANNO DOMINI MDCCCXCI” (1891) flanked by bas-relief lion’s heads above two bas-relief shields. An intermediate cornice with egg-and-dart and greek wave designs marks the top of the building base.³²

The shaft, or middle, of the building is four stories tall and faced with buff brick. The brick is decorated with evenly-spaced rows of terra cotta ovums. The three middle bays have triple windows separated by two simple brick pilasters and decorative floral terra cotta bas-relief panels between each floor. These three central bays are topped with arched windows that are actually located in the capital of the building. The corners of the building feature quoins comprised of terra cotta ovums and inverted ovums. The shaft of the building is topped with an intermediate cornice comprised of honeysuckle and egg-and-dart molding.

The top three floors comprise the capital of the building, and are faced with buff brick. The two lower floors have the same terra cotta quoins on the shaft of the building. The lowest level features large arches decorated with intricate molding and filled with triple windows in the middle three bays, a continuation and completion of the columns in the shaft of the building, which draws the eye up to the highly-decorated capital. The paired outer windows on that level are also arched. The next floor has triple windows in the middle bays and paired windows in the outer bays, and is topped by an intermediary cornice. The top floor is the most highly decorated, comprised of triple windows in each bay, between which are highly ornate terra cotta panels, and terra cotta shields project from the corners of the building. The building is topped with a large projecting cornice decorated with several types of molding, modillions, rosettes, and lion's heads.

The north façade on Fayette Street is slightly different in that it only features the arched openings on the five eastern bays of the base of the building, with the rest of the first and second floor bays divided up into paired windows or ventilation shafts. It also features an arched central entrance that is highly decorated with ornate bas relief and a balustrade. The other two facades are very plain, not easily visible from the street, and are accessed by alleys.

Staff Recommendations

The Equitable Building qualifies for landmark designation meeting the following standards:

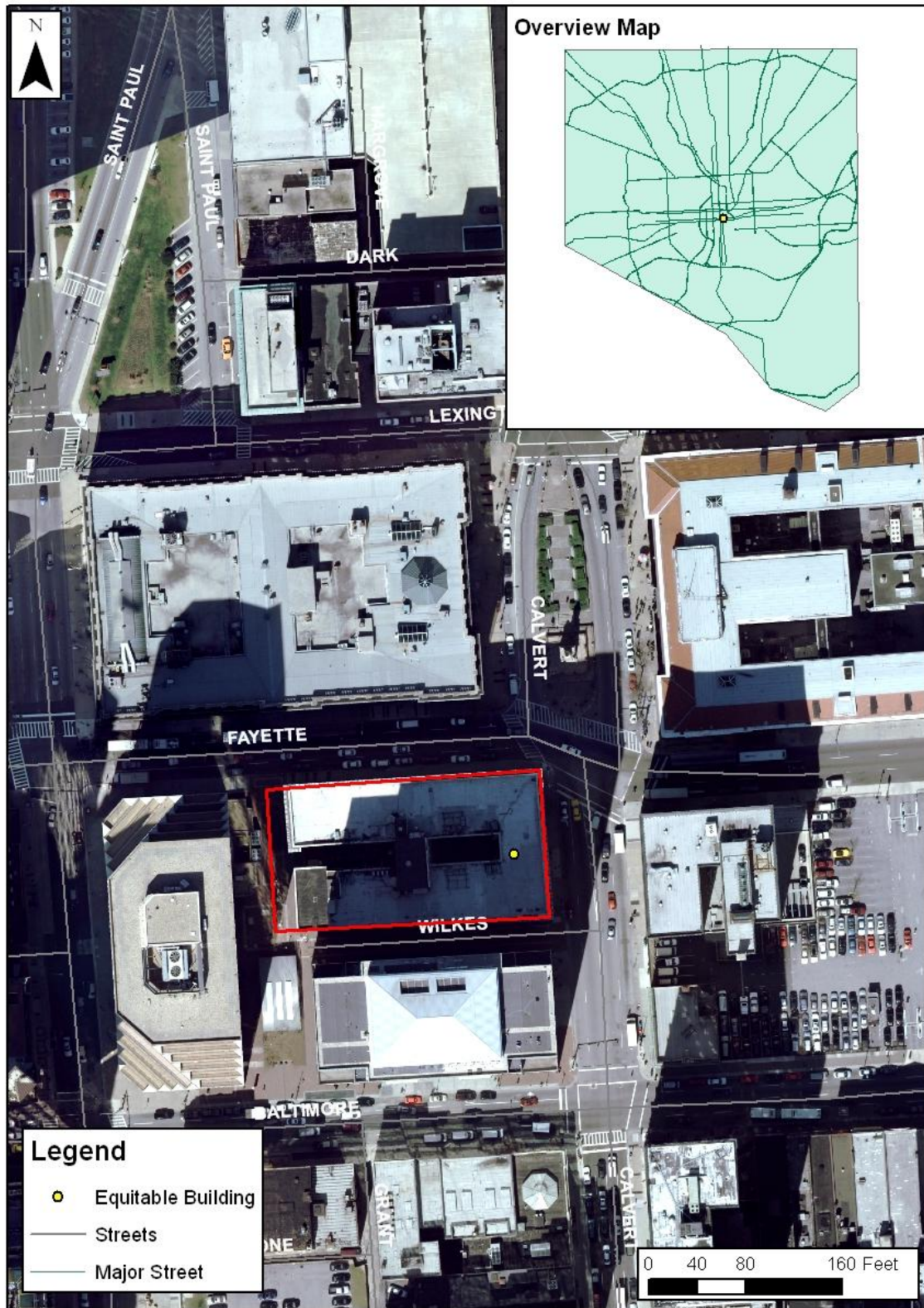
B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:

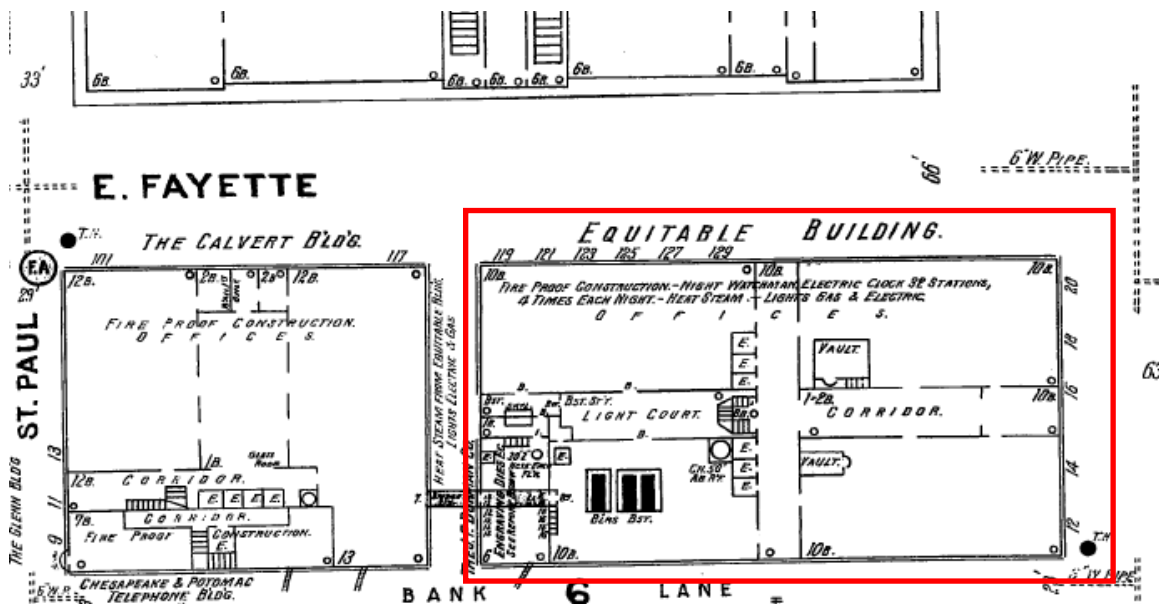
1. is associated with events that have made significant contributions to the broad patterns of Baltimore history
3. embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction

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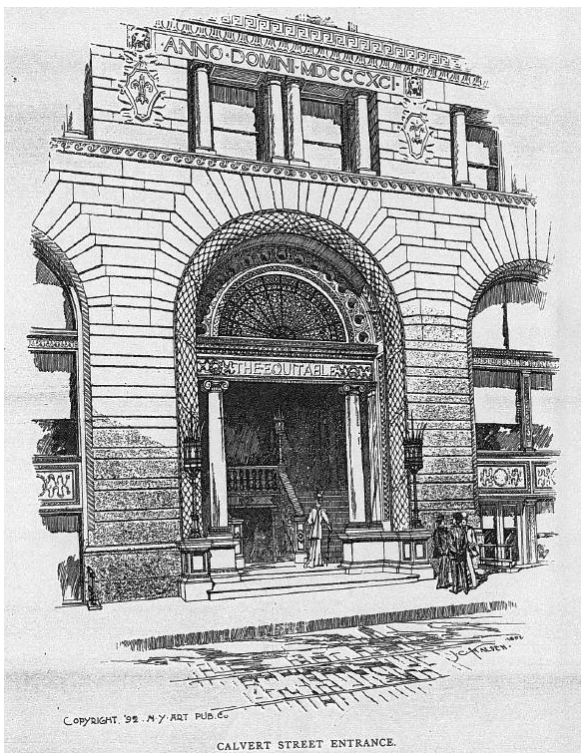
1891-1893, and is the oldest existing building on Courthouse Square. This commercial building was designed in the Italian Renaissance style by prominent Baltimore architects Charles L. Carson and completed by Joseph Evans Sperry, and features elements of Sullivanese architecture. The Equitable Building was the first building in Baltimore to be constructed with a “cage” of cast-iron girders and columns supporting the steel floor beams independent from the exterior framing of the building. The building was fireproof, and survived the Baltimore Fire of 1904, though the interior was destroyed. It was one of several fireproof office buildings that helped stop the fire from spreading further north. Throughout its existence, the Equitable Building has housed offices of businesses, banks, insurance, and law.

Locator Map



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Historic Images



Both images from *Equitable Building, Baltimore: A Description of Baltimore's Greatest Business Structure* (NY: Art Publishing Co., 1893).



“Equitable Bank Building” Hughes Company Glass Negatives, Accession # P75-54-A100g, c. 1905-1940
(The Photography Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, copyrighted)



“Hotel Rigbie Ruins and Equitable Building on East Fayette Street” 1904 (Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, Digital Collection, copyrighted)



“View northeast from East Baltimore Street at the Calvert, Equitable, and Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Central Headquarters buildings” J.E. Henry 1904, (Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, Digital Collection, copyrighted)

Current Photos



View of Calvert Street façade from south.



View of building at intersection of Calvert Street and E. Fayette Street.



View of upper stories of Calvert Street façade.



Upper stories and cornice.



Calvert Street entrance.



Detail of Calvert Street entrance.



E. Fayette Street façade.



E. Fayette Street entrance.

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- ¹ “Ten Stories High: Plans Ready for the Equitable Building to Go Up on the Barnum Site”; *Equitable Building, Baltimore: A Description of Baltimore’s Greatest Business Structure* (NY: Art Publishing Company, 1893)
- ² Henry Elliot Shepherd, *History of Baltimore, Maryland: From its Founding as a Town to the Current Year 1729-1898* (S.B. Brown, 1898), 1035. Available as a Google E-book; “Calvert Building and Construction Co.”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Jul 25, 1890; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 6
- ³ James Cutman, “Munsey, Equitable buildings are bought by D.C. investors”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Apr 26, 1979; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. F4
- ⁴ “Ten Stories High: Plans Ready for the Equitable Building to Go Up on the Barnum Site”; *Equitable Building, Baltimore: A Description of Baltimore’s Greatest Business Structure* (NY: Art Publishing Co., 1893).
- ⁵ “Equitable Building” Maryland Inventory of Historic Places, B-0083.
- ⁶ “Ten Stories High: Plans Ready for the Equitable Building to Go Up on the Barnum Site”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); May 20, 1891; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 6; Francis F. Beirne *The Amiable Baltimoreans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1951), 197.
- ⁷ “New Trust Company: To Use Barnum’s Hotel Site A Big Improvement Contemplated” *The Sun* (1837-1986); Oct 8, 1889; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 4
- ⁸ “Calvert Building and Construction Co.”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Jul 25, 1890; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 6
- ⁹ Ten Stories High: Plans Ready for the Equitable Building to Go Up on the Barnum Site”
- ¹⁰ H.L. Mencken, S.T. Joshi, ed. *Mencken on Mencken: a new collection of auto-biographical writings* (Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 19.
- ¹¹ “Large Real Estate Deal: A New Office Building Projected At Fayette And St. Paul Streets”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Jan 25, 1899; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 10
- ¹² H.L. Mencken, 19.
- ¹³ “Calvert Building and Construction Co.”
- ¹⁴ “Letter from Col. Mosby: Read at a Reunion of Cole’s Cavalry His Old Opponents in Arms”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Jan 11, 1895; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 8; Clayton Coleman Hall, ed. *Baltimore: Its History and Its People, Vol. 1* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co), p.645. Available as a Google E-book.
- ¹⁵ “Display Ad 50 -- No Title”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Oct 21, 1957; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. S18.
- ¹⁶ *Equitable Building, Baltimore: A Description of Baltimore’s Greatest Business Structure* (NY: Art Publishing Co., 1893).
- ¹⁷ *Equitable Building, Baltimore: A Description of Baltimore’s Greatest Business Structure* (NY: Art Publishing Co., 1893).
- ¹⁸ “Large Real Estate Deal: A New Office Building Projected At Fayette And St. Paul Streets”
- ¹⁹ “Building To Be Razed”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Feb 28, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. F2
- ²⁰ “Steel Frame Construction in the Baltimore Fire” in *Carpentry and Building* (New York: David Williams Company) Volume 26: 1904), 102.; *Insurance Engineering* (New York: The Insurance Press, 1905) Vol. 9, January-June, 1905, 47-48. Available as a Google E-book.
- ²¹ “Twenty-four Buildings Burned in Heart of Baltimore: City Most Valuable Buildings in Ruins” *The Sun* (1837-1986); Feb 8, 1904; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 1; John E. Woodruff, “Equitable Building Plans Paneling: Asks City’s Permission To ‘Rent’ 2 Inches Of Space: McKeldin” *The Sun* (1837-1986); May 25, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. C20
- ²² *Insurance Engineering*, 47.
- ²³ “Permits to Build”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Aug 11, 1904; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. 11; *Insurance Engineering*, 108.
- ²⁴ Jane L. Keidel, “Metal Paneling Plan Rejected: City Planners Say It Would ‘Uglify’ Equitable Building”, *The Sun* (1837-1986); Jun 10, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. B20; John E. Woodruff

²⁵ Jacquelyn Jackson, "Major office-space renovations underway at Munsey, other downtown buildings", *The Sun (1837-1986)*; Jun 18, 1980; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), pg. A10

²⁶ Timothy J. Mullaney, "Commercial real estate". The Baltimore Sun, May 12, 1993, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/406793895?accountid=10750>; Lorraine Mirabella, "Houston Property Company Sells Eight Downtown Buildings here ; Montgomery Joint Venture Buys Equitable Building, 7 Others for \$29.5 Million." The Baltimore Sun, Nov 02, 2004. 1.D, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/406625400?accountid=10750>.

²⁷ Lorraine Mirabella.

²⁸ Peter E. Kurtze, "Charles L. Carson" Baltimore Architecture Foundation, April 9, 2007, <http://baltimorearchitecture.org/biographies/charles-l-carson/>

²⁹ Peter E. Kurtze, "Joseph Evan Sperry" Baltimore Architecture Foundation, July 1, 2010, <http://baltimorearchitecture.org/biographies/joseph-evans-sperry/>

³⁰ *Equitable Building, Baltimore: A Description of Baltimore's Greatest Business Structure* (NY: Art Publishing Co., 1893).

³¹ Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*, 2nd Ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 82-99; Mary Ellen Hayward and Frank R. Shivers, Jr. (ed.) *The Architecture of Baltimore: An Illustrated History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 223.

³² "Equitable Building" Maryland Inventory of Historic Places, B-0083.